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ABSTRACT

The recent decision to award government funding to two independent Muslim schools in Britain has brought attention to the use of public funds for private institutions. This paper provides an overview of the movement for equal treatment of Muslim institutions and explores the issues surrounding equitable treatment of religious minorities. The paper consists of four parts: (1) a historical perspective of the Muslim population in Britain; (2) the development of education in Britain along denominational lines; (3) the establishment of Muslim Schools and their attempts to receive public funding; and (4) a discussion of the issues emerging from the recent decision to fund Muslim schools, its implications for education, and effects upon cultural pluralism. Research by Anwar (1993) and Sarwar (1994) estimates the Muslim population at 1.5 million, one-third of whom are school-age children. Since the Education Act of 1993 contains provisions for government support for schools formed by voluntary groups, it is suggested that racial segregation and religious apartheid contradict government rhetoric concerning multiculturalism. Equity before the law is the fundamental issue. The most important emerging issue is thought to be the shifting of sociocultural and economic contexts within which religious and ethnic minorities operate. (Contains 40 references.) (RIB)

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EQUAL ACCESS TO STATE FUNDING: THE THE CASE OF MUSLIM SCHOOLS IN BRITAIN

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Abstract

EQUAL ACCESS TO STATE FUNDING: THE CASE OF MUSLIM SCHOOLS IN BRITAIN

The recent decision to award government funding to two independent muslim schools in Britain has put the spotlight on the issue of the public purse being used for private institutions, and has also brought to an end the fifteen year battle that muslim communities have waged in order to receive equality of treatment. This paper provides an overview of this movement and explores the issues surrounding equitable treatment of religious minorities.

There are presently around 60 independent muslim schools in Britain today, a percentage of which have applied for voluntary aided status and have aspired to fulfil government criteria. Up until 1998 they have always failed, often on spurious grounds which were not used to deny funding to other schools. The conservative government was confused in its thinking on the issue, declaring that it was uncomfortable providing finance for what would be an all-black (asian) school, and that such institutions would be socially divisive (swann report 1985). These arguments lacked basis on two counts. Firstly, muslim schools are faith-based schools drawing upon people hugely differentiated on grounds of cultural, socio-economic and linguistic background. Secondly, apart from the decision to award funding previously being articulated erroneously in discourses of race rather than religion, asian schools were already a reality in Britain. Demographically, due to patterns of immigration, muslim communities have concentrated in areas around the country and there were, and still are, local state schools with enrolments of 95% or more muslim pupils. The decision to provide funding for muslim schools thus needs to be located within a social justice model, whereby financial support is forthcoming for all religious schools which satisfy existing government criteria on health, safety and education, rather than on grounds of racial/ethic origin. In short, we either provide quality before the law, or we dismantle existing legislation and embrace a "common school" for all. There are compelling arguments for both cases, but we cannot have it both ways: what is required is state policy based on consistency and equity to ensure parity of treatment. Finally, the labour government's recent decision in favour of muslim schools carries with it implications for sikh, hindu and potentially other groups, who give expression to the reality of a multi-faith britain, and who may also wish to have equal access to state funding.

Introduction

The struggle by Muslim communities to receive funding for their schools spans nearly fifteen years. More specifically, Hewitt (1989) notes that "the move comes 14 years and five Secretaries of State after the first naive approach by Islamia School in Brent, North London". (p22) This paper traces the background to this struggle beginning with an (i) historical perspective of the Muslim population in Britain. Next the focus moves to (ii) the development of education in Britain along denominational lines and (iii) the establishment of Muslim schools and their attempts to receive public funding. Evidence is drawn from my research of Muslim schools over the last ten years, and particularly the development and expansion of this category of schools. Finally, the paper concludes with (iv) discussion of the issues emerging from the recent decision to award funding to Muslim schools and the implications this has for the educational landscape in Britain and the shifting notion of cultural and religious pluralism.

(i) The Muslim Population in Britain

There are no definitive statistics on Muslims living in Britain. As official surveys currently do not ask questions pertaining to religious affiliation, estimates have to be drawn from questions relating to ethnicity. Using the 1991 Census and other statistical sources on demographic and social details, Anwar (1993) has attempted to calculate the number of Muslims in Britain. The recent survey was the first British census which included an ethnic question. It was based on nine categories: White, Black, Caribbean, Black Other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and 'Any Other' ethnic group. It is from this question on ethnicity, coupled with information on country of birth, that calculations can be made. The ethnicity question is useful in attempting to obtain a figure, because of the two categories of peoples originating from predominantly Muslim countries: Pakistan and Bangladesh. The

majority of Muslims in Britain are from these countries and are sometimes described as visible minorities, easily identified by dress and skin colour. Speaking languages such as Gujerati, Urdu or Kutchi, these groups are further differentiated by regional affiliation, occupation, customs and traditions.

Taking into account recent demographic trends, Anwar estimates that as of 1993, the Muslim population in Britain is approximately 1.5 million, and Sarwar (1994) calculates that around half a million are children of compulsory school age. In the absence of a question on religious affiliation in statistical surveys such as the Census, no exact figure is available and one and a half million can only be a working figure. Furthermore, among the one and a half Muslims in Britain, there are variations based not only on national grounds but also on sectarian differences. The general public is probably aware of the Sunnis and Shi'ite sects among adherents to Islam, especially since recent events in the Middle East, but this over-simplifies the Muslim communities since there are other major sectarian divisions.

For some Muslims who see themselves struggling to define their identity in Britain, the education system provides a focus for academic success but at the same time parents aspire to keep their children faithful to Islam. This generates discussion over educational provision in this country, within both the state system and the private sector.

(ii) The Development of Education in Britain

Educational provision in Britain was established on denominational lines dating back to the Middle Ages and faith-based groups have continued to perpetuate this tradition. By the 19th century, major social and economic upheaval due to the direct consequences of the Industrial Revolution called for social policy enactment (Wood 1960). Education was considered an

important agent of social reform to assist the nation in its economic endeavours. Government at this time was, however, somewhat ambivalent about its role in the provision of education services. Further, the Victorians were deeply suspicious of government involvement in daily events and feared the growth of state intervention into what had, hitherto, been a purely private concern (Curtis and Boultwood 1966).

Prior to 1850 what provision there was for educating the 'poorer classes' was by virtue of the charity schools founded by such organisations as the British and Foreign School Society of 1910 and the National Schools established in 1811. The origins of popular education in this country are ensconced in these charity schools, formed as a direct consequence of the 18th and 19th centuries' 'Age of Philanthropy'.

Throughout Britain the clergy initiated schooling as a means of carrying out their evangelical crusade. *The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge,* for example, attempted to recruit morally upstanding teachers, to assist in this mission. Similarly, teaching associations which flourished in the 1850s were often formed along religious lines, such as the Nottingham Churchmasters Association (Wardle, 1976). Whilst government began subsidising education to a limited degree in the form of treasury grants in 1833, it did not assume the role of instigator for educational provision, and universal free schooling was not implemented until the following century. Instead, different faith groups were instrumental in promoting education with a strong inculcation of religious values and began a tradition in denominational schooling which has continued to the present day. Furthermore, when the state did choose to venture into providing education for all children, the clergy continued to have influence: indeed, education and Christianity were inextricably linked in the public mind (Tropp, 1957).

Legislation enacted in 1902 and 1906 established the concept of a voluntary denominational school maintained by government funding existing alongside newly created board schools, the forerunner of local authority schools. Categories of denominational schools were designated in the *Education Act* (1944) with various levels of government control but generally referred to as voluntary-aided schools. Most importantly for this discussion, the 1944 Act did not specify religious affiliation. The relevant clauses of the 1944 Act provide for different levels of support according to whether a school is classified as 'voluntary aided' or 'controlled', but they do not specify *which* denominational groups are to be included in the scheme. Hence, Jewish schools have been established through the procedure of obtaining voluntary aided status and Muslims, and potentially Sikh, Hindu and other minority groups, also wish to avail themselves of this right. Yuval-Davis sees Muslim 'fundamentalists' spearheading the campaign for separate schools but:

> though Muslim fundamentalists are the most vocal, they are by no means the only groups demanding separate schools. Ultra-orthodox Jews, Seventh-Day Adventists, Sikhs and Hindus, have all done the same (p296).

She adds that the Labour Party has embraced the calls for separate schools in the name of equal opportunities and anti-racism, but the Swann Report (1985) concluded that voluntary aided Muslim schools would be socially and racially divisive.

The thorny issue in granting voluntary-aided status to Muslim schools is that unlike previous denominations, this new group has been perceived as predominately of a visible minority. Racial segregation; as well as religious apartheid, appears to contradict government rhetoric on fostering multiculturalism. Notwithstanding the issue of 'voluntary apartheid' (NUT, 1984), as funding has not been forthcoming for this minority faith group, there is here an equality before the law issue. Voluntary-aided status would bring with it grants towards

capital costs of the buildings, and running costs and teachers' salaries would also be paid. If Muslim schools were afforded this status, they would be placed in the same category as the more than 7,000 Anglican and Catholic schools and 21 Jewish institutions which currently receive government funding of 100% running costs and 85% of capital costs (CRE 1990). Figures provided in 1991 by the Department of Education and Science (now the Department for Education and Employment) demonstrate that approximately one third of maintained schools fall within the voluntary-aided category and are denominational in character. This accounts for 23% Church of England schools; 2,245 Roman Catholic; 31 Methodist; and 21 Jewish schools (ibid). Collectively,

> they represent a fudge and a mudge of religious and secular education, with the state paying the schools' running costs and 85% of their capital expenses, while governors and church leaders control the curriculum (Durham, 1989, p12).

(iii) Private Muslim Schools

Private Muslim schools have tried unsuccessfully to be afforded voluntary aided status and to be in receipt of public funding. The most well-documented case of the Islamia School in Brent, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, was taken to the High Court and the Government asked to reconsider its last rejection. Private Muslim schools which boast long waiting lists, have been increasingly clamouring for public funding along the lines of other denominational schools in Britain (Halstead, 1986). Feversham College in Bradford (formerly the Muslim Girls' Community School) is another example of a school currently going through he relevant stages of the procedure, having obtained support from the local education authority which is experiencing a situation of lack of places for the children within its area. In a policy statement on multicultural education, the opposition Labour Party signalled its general support regarding voluntary-aided status for Muslim schools (1989).

Similarly, Baroness Cox unsuccessfully attempted to introduce the *Education Amendment Act* which would have extended eligibility for public funding to independent schools providing an alternative religious ethos to existing state schools. More recently, the *Education Act* (1993) contains provision for the government support of schools formed by voluntary groups. The door has therefore appeared to be open for Muslim schools to receive state finance.

The ideal environment to promote the Muslim identity and faith is believed by some to be within this separate school system. Muslims maintain that these are not intended to disunite society but to preserve their Islamic identity. The voluntary-aided or government financed Muslim school would thus be permeated by an Islamic ethos supporting their 'unshakeable faith' (Halstead). Muslim children, it is argued, would be better British citizens as a result of such schools, providing a moral compass, and instilling a new sense of morality into society.

Muslim schools provide for parents who feel their children are caught in a situation of 'culture clash', whereby the whole ethos of British state schools and educational policy is seen as inconsistent with their way of life. Sarwar (1983) has highlighted the importance of cultural identity for Muslims and the fear that their community is threatened by the undermining of cultural consciousness: Muslim parents aspire to keep their children faithful in the face of perceived Western matrialism and permissiveness.

Whilst some Muslim parents chose private schooling, in the absence of financial assistance from the government, others do not wish to see their children education in ideological isolation and instead look to state schools to accommodate their needs. There is no coherent view among Muslim parents in this instance, as with those of other faiths, about the need for

their children to attend a denominational school, or whether spiritual matters can be left to the family and attendance at religious services. Differences of opinion are highlighted by Taylor and Hegarty (1985), and the Swann Report (1985) cites Cypriot Muslims for example who are said to oppose separate schooling. Similarly, Bradford's first Asian Lord Mayor is quoted as saying:

> I don't want separation in any form..... what we want is accommodation of our cultural needs, especially in the education system (cited in Halstead, 1988, p52)

This contrasts markedly with argument proffered by organisations like the Muslim Education Trust which suggests that there is a sizeable number of Muslim parents who do want government funding for separate schools (Cumper, 1990). For supporters of Muslim schools, the curriculum, both formal and hidden, should ideally reflect an Islamic orientation (Anwar, 1982; Hulmes, 1989). The significance of Islam and the importance of the Qur'an in education, necessitate specific responsibilities of Muslim parents, and accordingly, certain rights and duties of their children (Haneef 1979).

There is also a different type of inadequacy and that is of provision. In the East End of London where Britain's largest Bangladeshi community is established, 'thousands of Muslim children were without school places in 1989 and 1990' (Yuval-Davis, 1992, p286). Notwithstanding the government's legal obligation to provide schooling facilities and access to the National Curriculum, sizeable numbers of Muslim children have been denied their basic educational entitlement.

Presently, there are approximately 60 independent Muslim schools in Britain which serve the needs of children whose parents are financially able and willing to pay (Parker-Jenkins, Haw and Irving, 1998). The figure can only be given approximately for these institutions open and close randomly due to financial insecurity. In 1989 for example, the figure cited was 15 (Midgeley, 1989, Parker-Jenkins, 1991), and by the early 1990s the number given was in the area of 20 (Islamia, 1992a; Raza, 1993). They include a collection of single sex schools for girls and boys, primary and boarding schools (Rafferty, 1991; Midgeley, 1989). It is calculated that Muslim schools provide education for around 1% of an approximate population of 300,000-500,000 Muslim pupils in Britain (Weston, 1989; Berliner, 1993; Sarwar,1994). Varying in number form approximately 5 to 1,800 on roll, Muslim schools coincide with the establishment of Muslim communities around the country, such as the London, Leicester, Brimingham, Bradford, Kidderminster and Dewsbury areas. Relying on community support, they are seldom purpose-built and instead operate above a mosque or in disused schools, invariably connected to one or more mosques based on sectarian divisions as mentioned earlier.

Single sex schooling is also part of the appeal for Muslim schools. Under section 36 of the *Education Act* (1994), it is the duty of the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause him/her to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his/her age, ability and aptitude, either by attendance at school or otherwise. The term 'or otherwise' refers to home tutoring or education within the private sector. Instances have arisen where Muslim parents have failed to ensure their daughters attend school, because of an ideological opposition to co-educational schooling, and court proceedings have ensued (Barrell and Partington, 1985). Single sex education continues to be an aspiration for some Muslim parents, who see the phasing out of such schools as contrary to their interests. In Bradford, the Muslim Parents

Association was formed in 1974 to represent the Muslim view on this issue and from this time a number of private Muslim schools were founded along single sex lines and in accordance with Islamic principles (ibid). More recently, Muslim schools for boys have been established to accommodate the wishes of Muslim communities who have expressed a need for single sex schooling for their sons as well as their daughters (Islamia, 1994). In the absence of schools promoting an Islamic faith, Muslim parents have opted for alternative denominational schools, such as those run on Anglican or Catholic lines which are seen to be supportive of both moral education and single sex schooling (Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 1985; Neilsen, 1987).

The Road to Victory

The struggle to obtain government funding for Muslim schools spans 15 years as applications were repeatedly turned down, sometimes for spurious reasons. For example, a letter of inquiry in 1983, followed by a formal application in 1986 was rejected in 1990 (TES, 1998). Judicial review of the case resulted in the Secretary of State being ordered to reconsider his ruling. The application was again rejected, this time in 1993 on the grounds of surplus places in local schools. The same reason did not obtain for a Jewish school being granted funding in the same geographical area. Islamia made attempts again in 1995 and waited three years for a response which resulted in grant maintained status being approved (Lepkowska, 1998). Prior to this, Muslim schools remained "the only ones to have been consistently rejected for public funding" (TES, 1998). For the Al Furqan Primary School in Birmingham, a four year struggle took place to satisfy the criteria. Like many other Muslim schools Al Furqan boasts long waiting lists and has struggled to survive charging fees which are one third of the average private school (TES, 1998). As such the recent decision to provide funding serves as a milestone as Muslims in Britain have seen their previous applications rejected in the context

of increasing "Islamophobia" (Dialogue, 1997) and fear of "Fundamentalism" (Yuval-Davis, 1992).

The issue of state funding for faith-based schools has generated debate in the 1990s, caused among other things by the decline in Christian intake and the clamouring for financial support for Muslim schools. Critical re-evaluation of the religious clauses of the 1994 Education Act with a view to dismantling all denominational schooling is a possible solution to the problem as raised in previous studies (Swann, 1985; CRE, 1990). This would clearly provoke angry responses from Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Jews who presently hold voluntary-aided status (Lustig, 1990). In the meantime, Muslim schools continue their struggle for equal access to the same funds and the vast majority of Muslim children look to the state school system for their needs to be accommodated.

(iv) Issues Emerging

Theoretical perspectives underpinning the issue of Muslim schools in Britain fall into the category of shifting economic, social and cultural contexts within which religious and ethnic minority individuals and communities operate. They draw from social education and community development work (Mullender, 1991). Further Levin (1989) reflects upon "Deficits within Communities" in terms of a lack of resources in the community and issues related to minority and religion which limit the ability to access and influence education provision. Likewise, Mullurd (1985) raised the issue of "social justice" which stresses the role of institutional and structural discrimination and prejudices within education systems. For many Muslims, argues Hewitt, the issue is about human rights, as much as education:

"State funding for Muslim schools gives the community a glimmer of hope that

Muslims maybe recognised as a distinct ethnic minority (rather than Asians, Arabs etc.), with the legal safeguards that such status confers" (p22).

Furthermore, the decision to provide government funding is perceived as the celebration of multiculturalism. However,

> "for others, any move towards diversity away from a pseudo-Christian ethos is seen as a threat to 'Britishness' (ibid).

The idea that the flourishing of Muslim schools is a threat to British society is strongly contested by Muslims in Britain.

> "In reality, Muslims who prefer denominational education are merely following in the footsteps of Anglicans, Catholics and Jews in seeking to give their children a solid foundation in their own faith before they are let loose in the wider world" (ibid).

The shift in government policy on awarding funds to Muslim schools raises a number of key issues:

- "With money comes controls" to what extent will financial support effect positively or negatively curriculum development, staffing, and school ethos? Will it be a matter of accommodation or conformity in bringing Muslim schools into the mainstream?
- Increasing the possibility of combating social exclusion and facilitating collaboration within and between communities, increases knowledge of the impact of marginalisation and discrimination on minority schools. This can make a practical contribution to policy making in terms of laying the basis for equal opportunity and

equal resource access in minority denominational schools.

- The government's recent decision was to award funding to primary schools thus, neatly side-stepping the issue of funding girls' secondary schools which in the past have been criticised for providing "a narrow curriculum for domesticity" (Rendell, 1987). However, there are a number of Muslim girls' schools which have applied for funding and which have performed impressively in government league tables. There are a number of applications pending from Muslim girls schools, and the government will have to confront this contoversial issue.
- The choice of category used by the government meant that Muslim schools were awarded funding as "Grant Maintained Schools". This category has previously been used by state schools opting out of local authority control. How could two private schools opt out of local government control if they had never opted in? Associated with this is the decision not to award Muslim schools "voluntary-aided status" which would have placed them in the same category as the 7,000 and religious schools in Britain. It might have been politically expedient to utilise the "grant maintained" catergory but many Muslim communities may wish for recognition of their schools as part of religious pluralism in Britain. Forthcoming legislation may well provide the opportunity for a change in categorisation.
- Other schools will look to the government to see their religious and cultural convictions are not only respected but financially supported. The government's choice of label "grant maintained status" could equally have application to schools with a religious or philosophical ethos. Not withstanding nomenclature, Sikh, Hindu and potentially other groups who give expression to the reality of a multi-faith Britain, may also wish to have equal access to state funding.

Conclusion

It is too soon to try and analyse the impact of the policy decision regarding Muslim schools and their support from state funding. At this point we can say that they are reaping the rewards of a long battle to be awarded parity of treatment and equal access to the public purse. Furthermore, they join the line of other religious minority groups awarded funding in the tradition of denominal in Briatin. Future legislation may well place them in the "voluntary aided status" category so they may also assume parity of esteem within religious groupings in this country. In the meantime, as we digest the immediate decision, long term implications suggest that this new Labour Government has given fresh definition to what is meant by a Multi-faith Britain, and along with other countries such as Denmark and Australia has moved beyond the pious, rhetorical expressions of equality to the reality of equal opportunity in practice.

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